

WHAT'S PUBLIC ABOUT PRIVATE EDUCATION?

A publicly financed education for all children—regardless of social or economic status—is uniquely an American invention. Indeed, America was the first nation in the history of mankind to establish a public education system to serve all children. The Land Ordinances of 1785 and 1787 laid the cornerstones of our public education foundation. Article Ten of the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution reserved public school administration to the people through their individual states. The constitutions of the 50 states are where public education law was codified.

Founded on the premise that all men are created equal with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness America's forefathers established two firsts in the history of mankind. They founded an economic system based upon free market capitalism and a public education system based upon communism in so much as the property and school buildings were commonly owned and available to all children. Communities were given the right to tax themselves to fund their public schools with the charge that all children be equally served. America's architects conferred the right to tax—a right previously held by kings and dictators—because they believed a common education was necessary for America to maintain its freedom. In theory, Civics would be widely taught so citizens not only understood their rights; they would also understand their responsibilities.

The value placed upon learning and a publicly financed, free education for all American children resulted in a stunning achievement: America had the highest literacy rate in the world . . . and an educated workforce. It was a key factor in America's meteoric rise to international prominence. The U.S. economy was built upon the knowledge of its citizenry. Public education was the beacon of American opportunity.

The goal of public schools was to provide the poor and disadvantaged—as well as *all* others who chose to attend—a good quality, basic education. As with legal representation, those with social and economic standing have always had access to education. American public schools were established as a check to balance our economic system so those *without* means could share in the opportunities afforded through education and, thereby, propel free market capitalism. And it did, phenomenally!

The rest of the world sat up, took notice, and began creating their own versions of our public education system and scientific technology exploded. Now the developed world—and a majority of the third world—are out-performing the U.S. in k-12 student achievement. Over the past two centuries, learning to read, write, and cipher (mathematics) were enough to get ahead. In the 21st century, the technology race and competition for jobs went global.

America and Montana's deficit of a well-educated, skilled workforce is a result of long-standing malaise in student achievement and our collective failure to meaningfully value education. This is the core of our economic crises. It is part of the 700% increase in U.S. prison incarceration rates between 1970 and 2005. Montana topped the list, in 2007, for highest percent increase (41%) of prison incarcerations. In the latest census, Montana's 47th in per capita income. There is a link between incarceration, indigence, and education.

Enter the latest trend to jumpstart student achievement: the modern school choice movement, which includes charter schools and voucher programs. Its underlying theory is that competition will force public schools to improve. But in states with charter or voucher programs, public schools are not rising to the occasion; nor are they competing. They are capitulating, consolidating, and liquidating. Instead, school administrators are closing locations and eliminating programs due to budget shortfalls. Public education is neither inclined nor suited to compete. The institution does not know how to be competitive because bureaucrats are simply not wired to compete.

“2005 federal pilot study comparing math & reading performance between charter and public schools indicate charter students are not significantly improving any more than public school students.” *America's Charter Schools: NAEP Pilot Study*, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences NCES 2005-456, Executive Summary pp 1.

“Of at least 4,200 charter schools in 20 studies in 2010, found over 3,900 to have either negative or no significant impact in student achievement.” *The Evaluation of Charter School Impacts, June 2010, IES & NCEE 2010-4029.*

Charter and voucher programs aren't yielding higher student achievement. There are no guarantees when it comes to the modern school choice movement, but there's plenty at risk. Charter and voucher programs are private institutions entitled, through legislation, to receive public money. There is no mandate to provide schools in every community. They can locate wherever they choose. There is no mandate to provide an equal education for every child. If they determine their business or location is not viable, they can close their doors. What's public about privatization?

By their very design, charters and vouchers force public school systems to bifurcate, creating a tiered system. This is not only unfair and unequal; it is inherently more expensive to operate, more complex, and more confusing. The number of bureaucrats necessary to understand, interpret, and operate a tiered system increases exponentially. Not teachers, mind you, bureaucrats. Economy of scale shrinks. The future tax liability and cost structure of supporting a multi-tiered system is only now being revealed. Other states are finding they must increase funding to operate effectively . . . without measurable gains in student achievement.

“Lower overall mathematics performance in charter schools than in public schools.”—U.S. Dept. of Education 2005

The appeal is easy to understand. Parents feel they can finally have a measure of control by getting to choose which school their children attend. But, entrepreneurial schools have little accountability. Their primary objective is attracting enough students to operate affordably as free agents. The commercial temptation for these publicly-funded, private schools is to under-invest in skill and knowledge and opt for flash and pizzazz instead. The consequences will only be discovered long after tuitions and tax monies are spent.

In June 2010, the U.S. Department of Education released *The Evaluation of Charter School Impacts*, a summary of 20 studies on charter schools. The number of charter schools in the studies varied from a single school to 2,403 schools. The scope ranged from a single community or state to as many as 15 states. Of at least 4,200 charter schools in 20 studies, over 3,900 were found to have either negative or no significant impact in student achievement. About 215 charter schools reported a positive impact and another 70 charters reported mixed results in student achievement. *The Evaluation of Charter School Impacts, June 2010, Mathematica Policy Research, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (IES), National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE), NCEE 2010-4029.*

“In reading, there was no measurable difference in performance between charter school students in the 4th grade and their public school counterparts as a whole.”—Dept. of Education

Choice advocates claim fairness and equality is enhanced, yet charters and vouchers are even more dependent upon the ability and initiative of the family to select the most appropriate alternative *and* to follow through. Children with parents who are uneducated or unable to navigate the choice landscape are, for all intents and purposes, denied equal access. Children whose parents simply lack the financial means to provide transportation are denied access. Families in poor or disadvantaged circumstances are far less capable of interfacing with complex, bifurcated charter and voucher programs than local neighborhood schools. Well intentioned as these theories may be, the reality is modern school choice siphons money away from traditional public school programs. Economies of scale are being lost while non-education expenses escalate. Public schools become unable to provide competitive learning environments when funds are diverted to cover non-education expenses.

Rather than imitating other states—that are only now uncovering hidden pitfalls, costs, and loopholes—Montana needs to encourage parental and civic involvement in small, local, neighborhood public schools. We need to stop innovating and start rigorously educating. We should be consolidating administration, and co-vesting more school boards, parents and classroom teachers with the right to define academic programs in neighborhood schools based upon the school choice model our forefathers established. It is through unity and participation by the entire community that the less able are lifted. This is precisely why America established public schools. The betterment of all children results in the preservation of freedom, economic vitality, and betterment of the entire community.

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